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Charles Olson Changes Objects: A Reinterpretation of Projective Verse

Abstract

This article argues that what Charles Olson called objectism was not the mere rehashing of objectivist poetics, as has sometimes been supposed, but involved the working out of a position that was diametrically opposed to objectivism, with respect both to objects in the world and objects in the poem. Central to objectism was what I call here the rule of interchangeability. It is this principle of interchangeability, I argue, that both grounds poetry's open form and frees up its dynamic relational energy. In the second half of the essay I consider how these findings bear upon the poetry through detailed close reading of some of the earlier *Maximus* poems.

Charles Olson Changes Objects: A Reinterpretation of Projective Verse

This essay considers the nature of the object in the work of Charles Olson: how do Olson's objects differ from those of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and the so-called objectivists and does the difference matter?

Consider, to begin with, this key passage from the second half of 'Projective Verse':

Which gets us to what I promised, the degree to which the projective involves a stance towards reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of the poem itself. It is a matter of content, the content of a Homer or of Euripides or of Seami as distinct from that which I might call the more 'literary' masters. From the moment the projective purpose of the act of verse is recognized, the content does—it will—change. If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of the verse shifts. It has to . . . It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called 'objectivism.' But that word was then used in some sort of necessary quarrel, I take it, with 'subjectivism.' . . .

What seems to me to be a more valid formulation for present use is 'objectism,' a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is, as it issues from the hand of nature . . .

It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man . . .

It is projective size that the play, *The Trojan Women*, possesses,
for it is able to stand, is it not, as its people do, beside the Aegean.¹

The objectivists emphasized the objectification of the poem—the making of the poem into a literary object that would have, as a form, the solidity, the necessity, the ‘rested totality’ (‘to which the mind does not wish to add; nor does it’),² of those traditional forms (what Olson calls ‘inherited line, stanza, over-all form’)³ that Pound and his followers abandoned. But as Louis Zukofsky insisted, the objectivists’ poems were to be no less crafted than those inherited forms. This was the primary meaning of objectification: reification, the making of a definite thing. We can find another succinct expression of Zukofsky’s notions of ‘sincerity and objectification’ in Basil Bunting’s punning line: ‘laying the tune frankly on the air’.⁴ The ‘tune’ is redoubled in the musical meaning of ‘air’, while ‘frankly’ recalls sincerity—with the suggestion also of someone franking the air.⁵ The paradox of solidity in air also recalls Yeats’s ‘I *made it* out of a mouthful of air’ (my emphasis).⁶

There was no doubt a deliberate provocation, as Olson recognized, about Zukofsky’s use of the term ‘objectification’—with its connotations of what George Oppen called ‘the psychologically objective in attitude’⁷—to mean something like poetic form, just as there was a provocation in using the term ‘sincerity’ to stand, broadly speaking, for content. While Olson might share the objectivists’ emphasis on craft (his evocation of the line as carved wood recalls, for example, Pound’s frequent images of what Donald Davie called ‘the poet as sculptor’⁸ or the recurrent image in *Briggflatts* of the poet as monumental stonemason), what is no less striking is the emphasis on ‘relation’: objectism stands the poem as object smack-bang in the middle of a world of objects, of which the poet himself is equally one—as *The Trojan*

Women stands with its people by the Aegean Sea. We might say, thinking of Zukofsky's term, that the people 'add' something to it. Thus, Olson's stance is different from the monumental stance of 'objectivism'—for we can see now that part of what keeps an Olson poem standing is the presence of the world of which it is a part; the phenomenon of relation. The poem as object stands to attention—or rather stands as attention, in relation. It is in this sense that the Olsonian object is not just an object but an 'act'—an action, doing, happening—a fact that changes not only its content ('it has to') but the 'reality outside a poem as well'. That 'larger' reality ('the larger field of objects') is what puts the size into 'projective size'. It also means that the composition of Olson's words on the page is not only a scoring for the voice, as it is for example in Zukofsky's 'A' or *The Cantos*, or in *Briggflatts* or even *Discrete Series*. It is the penetration of the world itself by the work—and so of the work by the world. The object is in process, in motion. It adds to itself and it is added to.

The failure to distinguish between objectivism and objectism has a good pedigree. It was perpetrated first of all by the objectivists themselves. 'The problem remains for the reviewer and for any reader that it is impossible to confront Olson's poems without first of all acknowledging the audible presence of Pound in them', wrote Oppen. 'Not that Olson has not openly and handsomely acknowledged the debt'; yet 'to encounter Olson's work', he added, with a pointed allusion to Olson's association with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), 'is simply not an encounter with a new poetry.'⁹ Zukofsky himself wrote to Edward Dahlberg that 'Projective Verse' was a 'steal from my Objectivist issue, etc. bungled up, etc.'¹⁰

Why did Oppen and Zukofsky get it wrong? The answer may be found in a somewhat forgotten essay by Marjorie Perloff: ‘Charles Olson and the “Inferior Predecessors”: “Projective Verse” Revisited’. In this relatively early essay Perloff gave a forensic and seemingly devastating account of Olson’s indebtedness to his predecessors and contemporaries, one that has still not been satisfactorily answered by the poet’s admirers. ‘Projective Verse’, Perloff argued, ‘is hardly the breakthrough in literary theory it is reputed to be. It is essentially a scissors-and-paste job, a clever but confused collage made up of bits and pieces of Pound, Fenollosa, Gaudier-Brzeska, Williams, and Creeley.’¹¹ Olson’s ‘main deviation from the Pound-Williams aesthetic is that he muddles their concepts.’¹² As for Olson’s attempt to refine and develop objectivist principles, ‘objectism’ (‘as Olson irrelevantly calls it’),¹³ ‘is merely Pound’s “objectivism” in not very new dress.’¹⁴

I argue that Perloff’s account of ‘Projective Verse’ reveals some important features of Olson’s essay, which are indeed best seen by looking at it coldly—exactly as she does. It’s a reading that is not to be dismissed—instead we need to ask, as I do with Oppen and Zukofsky, how could one be so right and yet still be wrong? But the rightness is important and has been overlooked. There were fundamental differences between what Olson thought of objects and what the objectivists had thought. Perhaps it obscured these differences that Olson was still in the process of making them, working through them in poetry and prose. I read ‘Projective Verse’ not as the muddled rehashing of the ‘Pound-Williams aesthetic’, for which Perloff presents such a sound empirical case, but as an essay governed by intuitions that Olson had yet to articulate in comprehensive terms. The essay resists its predecessors, on this reading, not because Olson is in denial of his debts, but

because he was chasing other intuitions and groping for another formulation; if he slings mud, if at times he seems to flail around, it is in the attempt to secure a little discursive distance—to find himself space and time to think something else. And to think something else is what, in the end, he succeeds in doing. He thinks the demystification and dispersion of the poem as an object—and in the process demonstrates a concern with embodiment that was distinct from anything in Pound or even Williams.¹⁵ Objectivism meant, as Oppen and Zukofsky agreed, the objectification of the poem—the making of the poem into a durable formal object—whereas objectism reflects Olson’s concern to move away from such a static conception of form (‘This rested totality’, wrote Zukofsky, ‘may be called objectification’),¹⁶ to produce a poetic object that would move with the world, one object among others.

In what follows I first enlarge on the argument made above, before going on to read some ‘letters’ from *The Maximus Poems* in the light of this reinterpretation of Olson’s epochal essay.

1. Objects

Perloff seems to be on safe ground when she shows how even Olson’s well-known description of composition, and the role of the typewriter in refining composition, was anticipated by Pound. Olson writes:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts or phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician had.¹⁷

As Perloff shows, Pound had already said something similar:

All typographical disposition, placing of words *on* the page, is intended to facilitate the reader's intonation, whether he be reading silently to self or aloud to friends. Given time and technique I might even put down the musical notation of passages of 'breaks into song.'¹⁸

Such atomizing of Olson's essay is arresting, but it has the weakness of overlooking shades of emphasis that linger in the relation of part to part. The key word for Olson when discussing composition is not the typewriter, in fact, but the breath that the typewriter is intended to indicate. Olson 'hammer[s]' away at 'the breath, the breathing':¹⁹ 'If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts';²⁰ 'breath is man's special qualification as animal';²¹ 'that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings', and whence 'all act springs'.²² Indeed, when Perloff quotes from the passage that includes the phrase 'And the lines comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes',²³ none of the three quotations Perloff cites as source from Pound and Williams makes mention of 'breath'.²⁴ I should just say here that my purpose at this point is absolutely not to use a good critic as a straw man—but rather to draw as close as possible, by way of her evidence, to Olson's 'proper confusions'.²⁵ The major point is this—breathing teaches the art of composition because it is prior to it; and only because it is prior to it can the art of composition return the compliment and not teach us but remind us that we breathe. Pound emphasizes, as Bunting and Zukofsky would, the larger possibilities of melodic language when we 'break the pentameter';²⁶ Olson is getting at something more besides—not just the basis of rhythm in language but its basis in the breath—in what Creeley will call our 'own phenomenality'.²⁷ To grasp the significance of this we might

think of an analogous moment in the history of phenomenology, and the shift from Heidegger's conception of language as the house of being, to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the primordial nature of the perceptual body and the rapprochement, in his writing, of the body and language.²⁸

I want now to turn to Olson's use of the term 'object'. Olson uses the term 'object' to mean at least three things: first, the work of art as object; second, 'those other objects [that] create what we know as the world';²⁹ and third, the human being who 'is himself an object';³⁰ and all of these become part of what might be a fourth meaning: 'the larger field of objects'—in other words how one object relates to another and how that relation affects what an object is. The elasticity and ambiguity in the use of the term 'object' both reflects and exacerbates ambiguities in the first part of the essay among the terms composition, voice and breath (Olson often uses the terms 'large' or 'larger' to mediate among them). I suggest that all of Olson's terms might be said to sustain the 'confusions' that as Olson says are 'proper' to them—and it is by way of this confusion that Olson gives himself, and his essay, space to think.

Problems of definition are central to 'Projective Verse', since the essay is to a considerable extent an argument with definition as such³¹—a meditation on a certain concept of limitation, inherent for example in our ideas of line and form, of the poem on the page. Unlike the theory of objectivism, which found both locus and focus in the distinctive nature of the work of art as an object among other objects, the notion of projective verse, while it begins with the object, also moves (or is moved) energetically beyond it—hence the appeal to terms like projective and open, that would project beyond, or open up, the borders of the thing.³² In so far as it was a theory at all, objectivism was about

the objectification of the poem, the reification of the poem on the page, whereas Olson's notion of objectism situates the poem primarily in the breath and only secondarily on the page. Furthermore, while objectivism emphasized the poem as object, objectism emphasized all objects as objects and the poem as communicative field—something going on between and among every element that happens to be *there*: or there and not there—for, as we shall see, most of the things in a projectivist poem are never just in the poem; they are also parts of a world—but their participation in the world is re-activated in the poem, which produces in us the feeling that they may be most in the world by being in the poem, most in the poem by being in the world—most there by being elsewhere.

The paradox is the familiar one that nothing is just what it seems (nothing is frozen in time), but we only get to experience this paradox by attending first of all to the thing as it *seems to be*: 'that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity.'³³ (I shall follow Olson in using the terms object and thing more or less interchangeably. In 'Projective Verse', for example, we move in a few sentences from the 'secrets objects share', and 'the artist's act in the larger field of objects', to the idea of 'a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to takes its place alongside the things of nature').³⁴

To work too hard to describe the particularity of the thing, however, is always potentially to rob of its energy—to miss the kinetic, the Heraclitean motion of everything it is and becomes:

The error of all other metaphysic is descriptive, is the profound error that Heisenberg had the intelligence to admit in his principle that a thing can be measured in its mass only by arbitrarily assuming a stopping of its motion, or in its motion only by neglecting, for the moment of the measuring, its mass. And either way, you are failing to get what you are after—so far as a human being goes, his life. There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, reenact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. . . . Art does not seek to describe but to enact.³⁵

We might summarise Olson's thought here in the form of a question: what is the *rhythm of objects or things*? The stillness of the poem on the page, that thing there, is discovered eventually to move—the poem must be reenacted, its rhythm possessed. It begins on the page but when taken up—by the breath—it enters the field.

Olson sometimes seems to be saying that the objects in the poem are a different kind of object from what he calls 'those other objects' in the real world:

It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used . . . Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; . . . these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world . . .

Because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things; and, though insisting upon the absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing, yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions.³⁶

By 'insisting', as he does, 'upon the absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing', Olson might seem to be saying that the objects in a poem are, if not less real or less solid, different in kind from the things of the world—'those other objects': the things in the poem can be 'treated as solids' but their solidity, like their reality, is of a different order.

The obscurity that emerges here is, I think, a product of the fact that Olson wants to avoid the idea of reference altogether—the idea that the objects (named) in the poem may be taken to *represent* or *refer* to objects in the real world.³⁷ He makes the point emphatically several years later, in his 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein': 'Representation was never off the dead-spot of description. Nothing was *happening* as of the poem itself . . . It was referential to reality. And that a p. poor crawling actuarial "real"—good enough to keep banks and insurance companies, plus mediocre governments etc. But not Poetry's *Truth*'.³⁸ Reference, for Olson, is a 'dead-spot', a non-event. Whereas truth is something that is always 'happening'—and should be understood as an 'action' or a 'process'. By refusing to say that words refer he implies something like what Zukofsky means when he describes poetry as 'thinking with the things as they exist'—thinking *with* them, not referring *to* them.³⁹

Reference to leaves room for doubt (does the reference work? does the thing exist?), whereas 'thinking with' treats the thing's existence as a given. Words are 'handles'⁴⁰—thinking with them is therefore, as it was for Heidegger, a 'form of handwork'.⁴¹ And as Olson understands it, poetry is thinking with them 'fast'—at a speed that is to be deemed too fast ('INSTANTER') to be confused with referencing them.⁴² The reference has already happened, in the blink of an eye—the word, or the poem, has moved on.

So what does Olson mean, then, by the 'absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing'? In what does the 'absolute difference' consist? As Stephen Fredman has said, what makes the difference is the energizing process of composition and recognition—composition that is based on recognition; composition that is activated and propelled by it ('of composition (of recognition, we can call it)').⁴³ The poem is a dynamic assemblage of recognitions, any one of which may be energized at any point by all or any of the other recognitions of which the poem is comprised. Composition/ recognition makes all the difference, releases a rhythmical 'energy which is peculiar to verse alone'.⁴⁴ Poetry is literally a process of recognition—and there can be no end, in the sense of closure, to the poem, because there is no end to recognition, or to what might be recognized. Or as Robert Creeley puts it: 'poets[,] among others involved in comparable acts'—comparable acts, that is, to the act of writing poems—'have an intuitive apprehension of a coherence which permits them a much greater admission of the real, the phenomenal world, than those otherwise placed can allow.'⁴⁵ Poetry is not so much a different order of experience, as a recognition of the order in experience, as if for the first time—one that also allows the phenomenal world to come into its own, to be recognized for what it is.⁴⁶

Yet while it is true that the poet is the one who, in the act of writing, composes what he recognizes—traces on the page the rhythm of recognition—Fredman seems to oversimplify the matter when he says that ‘the poet is responsible for creating the entire context in which the objects exist and interact’.⁴⁷ He is thinking of a passage like the following:

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.⁴⁸

The poet is out there in the field—there is no composition without his active witness—but the ‘content and context of the poem’ force themselves ‘into being’; force themselves into the poem. There is a force, an energy, that goes by way of the poet, that is unimagineable without him (‘for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending’),⁴⁹ but he doesn’t create it, nor create what creates it—say rather that he recognizes it and his recognitions (which exceed him) compose it. The whole point about projective verse is that if open means what it says (if open means open to the world) there can be no end to context. Context will always exceed, will always open up onto some space beyond, each finite instance of the extension of content into form. In Rosmarie Waldrop’s terms, there is always more contiguity beyond what is assembled⁵⁰—the ‘sea/stretching out’ at the ‘feet’ of the poem, the ‘undone business’ that encircles, as the sea does, all business that is done:

It is undone business
 I speak of this morning,
 with the sea
 stretching out
 from my feet.⁵¹

I am reminded of that extraordinary image of Euripides' play standing by the Aegean, for 'feet' is surely a metrical pun. 'Undone business' is a wonderful phrase—suggesting a world of potential activity that is distinct from the business (the energy) so far done (composed or 'held') in the poem, yet touched, energized, at this juncture, by the thought of it.

Waldrop has also written of the importance of *relations between* in Olson's thinking:

Relation is central to Olson's view of the universe, not just of poetry. Repeatedly, in nearly identical phrases, he insists: 'At root (or stump) what *is*, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us—and the terms of what we are.'⁵² Or he adds: 'what happens BETWEEN things, in other words: COMMUNICATION'⁵³ . . .

Olson anticipates or parallels much of what we have more recently become aware of through the efforts of semiologists, communication theorists, and environmentalists when he stresses again and again what happens *between things* and when he labels it communication.⁵⁴

This is helpful and important, because what I want to get at is the idea that the 'tension' that matters in Olson's work, the projective tension, also has to hold between what the poem has said and what remains unsaid—that the

energy *there*, busily between, feeds into such energy as may be captured (simultaneously galvanized and registered), by the poem. The poem is not a closed circuit, it is an open one—it ranges, like a field. Its reality tends beyond itself.

For all Olson's talk of the distinctive nature of poetic reality, this reality is necessarily alive with a 'secret objects share'⁵⁵—its reality shimmers with a larger reality, with what Olson calls 'projective size'.⁵⁶

As Waldrop recognizes, Olson's notion of projective verse was more than simply a theory of poetics: it was about poetry as 'a stance toward reality'; that is to say, poetry as comportment or a manner of being in the world.⁵⁷ For the projectivist poet, mankind doesn't stand above what Olson calls 'those other objects of nature' but alongside them and the openness of open form consists in its openness to all such objects. The sheer length and spread of *The Maximus Poems* points metonymically beyond the poems to the world of which they are a part. The poem bespeaks a flow between the things it comprises and the things it does not: it is an essential feature of the projectivist poem that there appear to be nothing on which it might seem to shut the door—so that what is included remains open or feels as if it is open to what is not included. The 'stance towards reality', then, is an open stance. But instead of inviting the whole world into the poem, as if the poem might contain the world, this 'stance' is there to invite the poem into the world—exactly the other way round. 'I want, as Charles Olson says, to come into the world.'⁵⁸ A poem has no special claim on the world—rather it is open to the claims of the world, as one useful object among others. A poem cannot move the world, for the world is already moving. Instead it has to learn to move *with* the world—in time to the world. 'It is all a rhythm', in Creeley's words.⁵⁹

It is this decentering of the poem—as if the poem’s centre were not in the poem but *in the world*—this reconfiguring of the poem’s relationship to what is *not* the poem, that may be said to constitute Olson’s primary originality. For Olson, the poem is not to be defined over against the world, as it is for Ezra Pound—*The Cantos* as ironic or elegiac Jeremiad. *Maximus* doesn’t open up a distance between itself and the world—the poem and the not-poem, to adapt the terms of Ralph Waldo Emerson;⁶⁰ it is not enough even to say that it tries to close the distance down. Rather it would reconfigure that distance—by dispersing it altogether. Now, we can see this beginning to happen in the work of Williams: when Williams complains in *Paterson* of ‘Minds like beds always made up’ or admonishes us to ‘waken from a dream, this dream of / the whole poem’, he is saying that that world that is not the poem must be allowed to unmake, or at the very least disturb, what the poet’s mind has made; the poem can’t be whole in itself because it rests upon the world.⁶¹ Olson takes this insight at least one degree further—and here once again is his originality: the idea that the poem rests upon the world, that it is infused with the energy of all that it is not, is not just a discovery that Olson’s poem is in the process of making, as for example *Paterson* makes it; the world is not the sea to which the poem as river flows. Rather the poem is responsive to the world in its every syllable (which is why the ‘syllable, king . . . is spontaneous, this way’),⁶² as if the river and the sea were always already interspersed and interchangeable; as if the objects of the poem, the objects found in the poem, could in theory be exchanged at any moment, energetically, with those ‘other objects of nature’ that appear to have been left out. Or to return to Waldrop’s emphasis on ‘between’, we may say that the poem exists most meaningfully somewhere between where it is on the page

and the world towards which it orientates itself. The real poem (*the poem that the poem would be*) lies between, projects itself between, itself and the world. It steps ('stance') into the breach.

The breath has a special place in all this. For Olson it is the groundbass of all rhythm—the one living constant. The breath guides the poet in his placing of himself in the world: the poem is what places him, gives him a place, brings him, as Creeley says, into the world. The breath tells the poet that he is there, or else tells him how to get there. The breath is a proof that the 'high-energy construct' is working as just that. The poem breathes most easily in other words—its rhythm is at its most audible, palpable—when the poet has come into the world. Yet part of the proof that the poet has come into the world is his not being anywhere to be found: for he leaves the poem to breathe in his place. What we find is his breath, which is to say the rhythm of his passing through and passing on. The poet comes into the world by seeming to depart from it—but what he has departed from is simply the poem as a shelter for the ego. Only by thus leaving the poem does the poet not so to speak hog the world. If he hangs on to the poem (if he makes the poem the scene of his subjectivity as opposed to the scene of his being) he only clutches at the world. Another way of saying this is to say that what I will call here the rule of interchangeability, according to which *those objects referenced in the poem express their relationship to those objects outside it by the fact that they are notionally interchangeable with them* (i.e. all are of equal value, none is privileged; the poem is a perspective rather than a privilege)—an interchangeability that is felt dynamically as energy, a tending inwards and outwards to and from the poem, from and into the world—applies not only to what Olson calls 'those other objects of nature' (as distinct from human

beings), but also to human beings themselves. The poet loses his ego in the act of writing and becomes representative (and interchangeable) man.

As I have said, this logic is already implicit in Williams's *Paterson*. And to that extent Olson's originality can be viewed as a matter of degree: 'Projectivist Verse' is, as Williams recognized, an intensification of the latter's egalitarian logic, a logic that is simultaneously constructive (in the sense of 'high-energy construct') and deconstructive: the energy, figuring outwards, tends away from the construct back out into the world to the point where the construct, like Heraclitus's river, only appears to be there—when we engage it, it flows into something altogether larger, swifter, and more energetic.

Contrary to Perloff, then (and contrary, ironically, to Zukofsky), the relationship between poem and world as conceived by Olson and Creeley is, despite the differences between these last, fundamentally different from the relationship as broadly conceived by more or less objectivist poets like Zukofsky, Oppen and Lorine Niedecker. When Niedecker, for example, writes 'what would they say if they knew / I sit for two months on six lines / of poetry?' she imbues the whole poem with the weight and gravity of that still and concentrated sitting.⁶³ She stresses the objectification of the poem, that is to say the making of the poem into a durable object, on reification in the affirmative Arendtian sense of world-making, contributing to the manmade things of the world. In the scales of poem and world, the objectivists put greater weight upon the poem. Olson and Creeley by contrast ultimately put weight upon the relationship between the poem and what Creeley will call 'some deeper complex of activity'. The poem, where it is successful, taps into that deeper complex of activity and therefore must resist its own tendency to reification—in other words to closure. Viewed in this light it is easy to

understand why the poetry of Black Mountain might be thought of as *post-modernist*—for these poets abandon the idea of the poem as cultural monument, an object that stands above and apart, much as practitioners of postmodernist prose have been said to abandon the idea of the grand narrative.⁶⁴ Superficially of course, when we open a book of poems by Olson or Creeley the monument still appears to be there: but as we immerse ourselves in the poetry we see how it attempts to deconstruct its apparent autonomy in the name of a relational process. *The poem is only there until we have learned how to read it.* There is a tremendous Romantic impulse at work here, inherited from Emerson and the American nineteenth century, as critics such as Fredman have observed. The poem seeks to embrace a cosmic wilderness, Emerson's Nature, immediately beyond the *frontier* of the line—but this Nature is now conceived in something other than the pictorial terms in which Emerson could sometimes appear to conceive it.⁶⁵ Nature isn't something we see—it is an activity we feel and participate in.

2. Life and Letters

In the second half of this essay I will try to demonstrate the validity of my findings through close readings of two sections from *Maximus*. 'Letter 5' is a peripatetic meditation on the relationship between life and poetry, life in and out of print. So in its different way is 'Letter 27 [withheld]'. In both letters the image of limit becomes a figure for its exact opposite, for what is illimitable, uncontained, no longer bracketed or 'withheld'. Limits are what one must pass through—or in Williams's words, there is 'an/interpenetration, both ways'.⁶⁶

In the essay 'Projective Verse' Olson attacks what he calls 'that verse which print bred', yet appears to suggest in *Maximus* that print may suffice:

A magazine does have this 'life' to it (proper to it), does have streets,
can show lights, movie houses, bars, and, occasionally,

for those of us who do live our life quite properly in print

as properly, say, as Gloucester people live in Gloucester

you do meet someone

as I met you

on a printed page⁶⁷

Now, if Olson were merely setting up an analogy here between two different forms of propriety, property, appropriateness; or, to put it another way, between two different manifestations of belonging—in the sense of what must belong to or be a property of x ('proper to it') in order for x to be recognized as x; an analogy, in other words, between those who belong to the written word and those who belong to the life of a locality (a particular time and place that is itself a synecdoche for the world at large); between people who live 'in print'—namely writers and especially poets—and people who 'live in Gloucester'; an analogy in effect between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional—then he would be guilty of what he emphatically condemns as 'comparison . . . or, its bigger name, *symbology*':

All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing . . . but that such an analysis . . . does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity.⁶⁸

What alternative might there be to seeing 'Letter 5' as proposing an analogy or comparison? I take Olson to be saying that to meet someone in print, for those of us who live in print, is, by so meeting them, to be *projected beyond print*, into life as such—without inverted commas ('A magazine does have this "life" to it').⁶⁹

As 'Letter 5' continues, it becomes clear that print is not and cannot be the measure of Olson's ideal life and polity:

It's no use.

There is no place we can meet.

You have left Gloucester.

You are not there, you are anywhere

where there are little magazines

will publish you⁷⁰

Print is not the measure, because, in the words of 'Letter 6', 'Polis is / eyes'—is, that is to say, the sum or field of all fully individuated readers—I's—and 'so few / have the polis / in their eye'—so few are individuals;⁷¹ just 'the few of us there are / who read'.⁷² It is easy to miss the witty inversion here of the

normal order of things: to have a polis in one's 'I', the letter imbued by the whole civic body, is more important than to have an 'i' (quite literally) in one's polis.

Publication is easily corrupted:
 what sticks out in this issue is verse
 from at least four other editors
 of literary magazines⁷³

Publishing is at best a conduit. What matters is reading and writing—'the attention, and / the care':⁷⁴

I came to your door
 just because I had read a poem by you in just such a little magazine
 as you now purport to edit⁷⁵

A poem, a magazine—single items singled out.

I'll put care where you are, on those streets I know as well as (or better:
 I have the advantage
 I was a letter carrier, read postcards, lamped checks, talked
 at the back doors

I'll meet you anywhere you say⁷⁶
 —'anywhere', that is to say, your writing speaks. 'I can't get away', he writes,
 'from the old measure of care'⁷⁷—'I who hark to an older polis'.⁷⁸ For this
 oldness is part of what he calls 'the context of / now!'—the space-time of
 living history.⁷⁹ 'Your magazine might excuse itself / if it walked on those legs
 all live things walk on'—your magazine might excuse itself, in other words, if
 it moved.⁸⁰

Thus I read the famous lines ‘Limits/are what any of us/are inside of’⁸¹ not simply as an unmixed affirmation of the necessity of humble containment, or self-containment, as Fredman does, but as a brilliant repudiation of the mind-forged manacles of the magazine mentality—a repudiation of small-mindedness and publication for publication’s sake.⁸² Your limits are where you find them—what you take them to be. (There is often in Olson the suggestion of a subtle congruence among limits, limbs and verse lines—for limits, like limbs, are a species of extension as well as definition: ‘The mind, Ferrini,/is as much of a labour/as to lift an arm/flawlessly’:⁸³ to lift an arm is to write—or, equally, to fish or fly: ‘The nest, I say, to you, I Maximus, say /under the hand, as I see it, over the waters /from this place where I am/ where I hear’—where to ‘hear’, the poem argues, is also to breathe, write and see.⁸⁴)

Something similar may be said for tradition:

that tradition is

at least is where I find it,

how I got to

what I say⁸⁵

The monuments do not form an ideal order, as T. S. Eliot said, they enable a finding—of themselves, of oneself, of one’s voice.⁸⁶ ‘Find’ insinuates both *field*—a field is where you find it, where something is to be found—and its rhyme-word *mind*. It also suggests *fin*—‘as fine as fins are’—where *fin* could also be taken to mean end, limit, finish; but the word remains unfinished, open.⁸⁷

As Olson's reader, one finds oneself *going around in circles* in a positive sense: that is how one reads, circling the verse, swooping on this or that, navigating the great wing-beats of the pages. The poem becomes one's field (or a field within a field; the one 'opening', in Robert Duncan's word, into another)—one's magnetic habitat.⁸⁸

Olson's portrait of himself as a 'letter carrier' recalls a passage from his autobiographical essay 'The Post Office' (1948) in which he evokes his father's job as a carrier of letters—whose chosen 'route' ('this process of selection') resembles the poet's field—and the absolute seriousness, the sense of responsibility ('modesty, care, proportion') with which his father went about his work:

My father was old fashion. He had notions having to do with courtesy, modesty, care, proportion, respect. He had them confused with his work. A letter, say. He was scrupulous about a letter. He had the idea it was somehow important just because it was made up of words (he had the notion that words have value, as signs of meaning and feeling) and because it was communication between two persons (the idea of a person seems to have meant something to him). Thus he took himself seriously as the last, and only directly personal agent, of several hired by a stamp to see that a letter reached the person to whom it was addressed or, rather (as I am sure he, with his notions, would have put it) for whom it was meant.

As part of such motion he took himself to be responsible.⁸⁹

I seem to see here in the image of the letter carrier the figure of the poet—and hence of the poem, which is that part of the poet from which his subjectivity has been dispelled—as transparent 'high-energy construct', of the self

reduced to pure agency ('such motion'), the transport of meanings 'between two persons'; as that agent that bears or carries letters ('signs of meaning and feeling') and yet is something more than they—the upright, bipedal harbinger of the world.

3. Polity

'I have this sense / that I am one with my skin', Olson writes, in 'Letter 27 [withheld]';⁹⁰ exuding a plump complacency, the fullness of being felt in the flesh, that recalls Whitman's boast, 'I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.'⁹¹ The faith in being that is manifest in what Olson chooses to predicate of 'polis', the sense of *is*-ness, is emphatically underlined by the iteration of the Ishmael-like 'is' in all three words—'Polis/is this'—a presence projected from one word to the next (compare 'all that I no longer am, yet am/. . ./ /more than I am', where the word *am* is also connected, phonetically, acoustically, to 'An American').⁹²

There is a solidity about Olson's felt conception of being in the world that recalls not only Whitman but Williams: 'Outside / outside myself / there is a world, / he rumbled, subject to my incursions / . . . / which I approach / concretely';⁹³ except that for Olson the world that Williams 'approach[es]' is already so much there (*always already there*, in the jargon of phenomenology), that the speaker hardly needs to approach it ('I come back to the geography of it'), before it advances to meet him: 'forever the geography / . . . leans in / on me' (notice how the *e* sound of 'leans' is picked up again in 'me' after the subtle, dense—the almost sub-atomic—play of prepositions: 'in / on'), making him 'a complex of occasions'; a coming together, in space, of spaces.⁹⁴

For Olson, some notion of embodiment, where *being there* means being *part*, amorphously but indivisibly, of a body that is always more or less dynamic, energized, kinetic, on the move, is fundamental to the notion of projective verse. Two things follow from this: firstly, that the poem doesn't just lie there on the page—it projects both verse and voice. The consciousness that one is an embodied being, the idea that to be properly mindful—to have a handle on being—is to live in one's body, is part of what projective verse was about; not only what it was about but an essential element in its developing conception of what it was doing, enacting, performing—its rightful business. Secondly, far from being merely a restatement or phase of objectivism, as has been suggested, projective verse was always peculiarly alive to the limitations of the object; seeing as it did that things couldn't last ('But you see, nothing lasts'⁹⁵), that they always, willy-nilly, *moved* and therefore *changed*, became other things, the projective poem could not help but have a metaphysical orientation; a commitment to the invisible world—or rather to the world in its visible and invisible phases; to the thing as it came and went.⁹⁶

'Letter 27 [withheld]' begins with a playful image of space-time, stretched between 'I' and 'it', ego and id: 'I come back to the geography of it'. 'I come back' could mean I come back in time—I come back mentally, in memory—I return to that subject. It could also mean, I come back through space, cut across space, to space—to the geography of it'. The idea that the poet is coming rather than going is also significant: in turning to 'it'—whatever *it* may be—he also turns to us. He doesn't turn his back (doesn't go) but includes us.

‘the land falling off to the left’: the intimate language of local geography invites us to recall our experience of similar landscapes—or, if you will, the experience of the insistent localism of landscape, the way it, in Creeley’s terms, ‘surrounds us’.⁹⁷ The playfulness, a sense of intellectual intrigue, is augmented by the use of the term geography—a word that seems to foreground its conceptual nature for a moment before it comes down to earth.

This leads into a richly evocative passage that might almost have come out of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* or Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’—except that the image of darkness falling, the inevitable closing of the day, seems to be more about basking in the afterglow of summer than ruminating on the inevitability of death. There is a hearty acceptance of parental sexuality:

my father,
a man for kicks, came out of the tent roaring
with a bread-knife in his teeth to take care of
a druggist they’d told him had made a pass at
my mother, she laughing

Castration anxiety, or the memory of it, is neatly sublimated here into a comic-book recollection of his father, whose ‘tak[ing care]’ is a double-edged sword. The act of displacement (the threat to the druggist) allows the speaker to share his mother’s laughter. These warm recollections are separated into two verse paragraphs by two more lines of simple local geography—the poet getting his bearings, fitting himself to the place and to his memory of the place:

To the left the land fell to the city,

to the right, it fell to the sea

There is also here I think an inescapable awareness of the space of the page—the geography of *that*—of left and right margins—of the position of poem and poet between land and sea. Throughout *Maximus* Olson mines the idea that the edge of the poem, the lines' end, constitutes a kind of land's end ('a coast/is not the same/as land'⁹⁸), with the page as sea, ocean, Okeanos.⁹⁹ The significance of these identifications, or rather complications, becomes more pronounced as the poem proceeds. The poem's centre of gravity balances tip-toe in the audible caesura that is a feature of both these lines.

'Letter 27' then changes tack, launching into a vindication of its organic evolutionary necessity—'no bare incoming/of novel abstract form'—of the indivisibility of form and content: which is to say, 'This' (three times in four lines). Yet 'this' means not only the poem: it opens to include everything, familial and cosmological ('those antecedent predecessions, the precessions'), that has brought poem and poet to this point: 'the generation of those facts/which are my words'. We then pick up the verb 'coming' again from the opening lines ('I come back'; 'we came home'; 'father . . . came out'), which had also been echoed in 'incoming':

it is coming

from all that I no longer am, yet am,
the slow westward motion of

more than I am

Here Olson runs together the motion (and rotation) of planets, seas, explorers, history, generation, the human body—'animal tranquility and decay,' as

Wordsworth has it¹⁰⁰—setting them all at the same time in a kind of exquisite counterpoint with the rightward (eastward?) motion of the verse and adding up to something like an effect of slow motion.

Yet these lines are also, inarguably I think, a description not only of the motion and rhythm of the verse, they are a perfect description of the act of writing itself, as so beautifully described by Stanley Cavell, for example, as the practice of holy living and holy dying—the giving up of oneself to one’s work, and the giving up of one’s work as the re-hearse-ing of mortality—the thousand deaths of any author.¹⁰¹

The acceptance of death and disintegration (‘no Greek will be able to discriminate my body’), of death not as closure but as yet another opening, gives way to a remarkable statement of the unexceptional nature of all exceptionalism (the *special* in what is otherwise merely ‘spatial’), American or otherwise; that is to say, the simple complexity of all particularity:

An American
is a complex of occasions,
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.

Especially fine here is Olson’s hovering wordplay, as we are momentarily tempted to refer ‘themselves’ back to ‘An American’, revealing the plural in the singular, in something like the manner of Frank O’Hara’s ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ (easily O’Hara’s most Olson-like poem), while ‘complex of occasions’ sounds like the untidier, more concrete *complications*.¹⁰²

I have this sense
that I am one
with my skin.

One would not have thought that there was any more mileage left in punning on 'sense' but Olson's vernacular steals another march on us, evoking the skin as an organ of sense-perception (touch). The off-rhyme of 'one' and 'skin' (which builds on the preceding covert off-rhyme with the *en* of 'sense') draws attention also to the oneness of the skin—which contains (to use another Olsonian term), if anything does, the oneness of the body, and thus plays against the immediately preceding image of the body's diffusive pluralizing history ('occasions'). 'Polis/is this', the poem will end by saying—meaning 'polis' is the 'geometry' of singular and plural; it is what gives them shape, the equilibrium of both in a given life, a given poem.

'Each man does make his own special selection from the phenomenal field', Olson writes, but each 'particular act of individuation' matters less for what it says about each man's personality than for what it reveals about act and process.¹⁰³ Individuation in other words is part of the process—but it is not the aim or the end of it.

I . . . cannot satisfy myself of the gain in thinking that the process by which man transposes phenomena to his use is any more extricable from reception than reception itself is from the world. What happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within. The process of image . . . cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on. Here again, as throughout experience, the law remains, form is not isolated from content . . . And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again.¹⁰⁴

Energy comes from the transposition of phenomena—their conversion from one part of the ‘phenomenal field’ to another. But the poem is not alone in transposing phenomena. Energy—the conversion of one thing to another thing or else to another state—is the nature of the world. The poem doesn’t move the world by itself; it discovers it to move and by so discovering joins in the movement. The skin, for Olson, does not separate us from the world but connects us to it. It doesn’t shut us off from energy and experience but on the contrary makes them available. It is not a barrier but a ‘power of conversion’.

Whatever one thinks of this as physics or phenomenology, what remains fascinating is the prominence of the role that Olson gives to the skin. Part of what he is saying is that reception is *active*. In the nineteenth century one might have spoken, Emerson-like, of the constitutive action of the mind—meaning that the mind is not just a passive receptacle of empirical data or Lockean ideas. The interest as regards Olson is that he gives this constitutive role not to the mind but to the skin—the *constitutive action of the skin*. No less interestingly, he identifies (transposes? converts?) the skin of the body with (into) something like the skin of the body of the poem; that is to say, the form of the projective poem is skin-like—the line’s end a figure for the skin as boundary, the line beyond which something inside is converted, energetically, to something outside and vice versa. So when Olson says that ‘forever the geography / . . . leans in / on me’ he is saying that it penetrates his skin. (He is also saying that he must resist any nostalgia for the personal history in which that geography is suffused: he who has ‘come back’ must thus ‘compell’ what was back ‘backwards’—holding fast thereby to the present.)

Thus Olson reaffirms what the poem has already said: that for the duration of the act of writing he is one with both his body and his poem—a process which of course cannot last: like his ancestors in Gloucester he must ‘yield,/to change’. Or, to put it another way, like the Ancient Greeks one dies (‘this,/Greeks, is the stopping/of the battle’)—and one does not . . . ‘I come back’: meaning, I am reincarnated; or rather *one* is, or part of one is. ‘Polis/is this’: which is to say, it is *also* this: it is everything in the ‘phenomenal field’—the battlefield—life *and* death.¹⁰⁵ The poem is there and not there—what it comprises all but interchangeable with what it does not. We are all, poet and all, interchangeable to that extent with Greeks, a state we might think of as a postmodern reincarnation of metempsychosis itself.

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- ¹ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950), *Collected Prose [CP]*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239-49 (pp. 246-8).
- ² Louis Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification: with Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff' (1931), *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), pp. 193-202 (p. 194; pp. 195-6)
- ³ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 239.
- ⁴ Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts*, *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, ed. Don Share (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), pp. 37-61 (p. 42).
- ⁵ Compare Bunting's Preface to the 1968 edition of his poems: 'I have set down words as a musician pricks his score, not to be read in silence, but to trace in the air a pattern of sound'. *Poems of Basil Bunting*, pp. 554-5 (p. 555).
- ⁶ W. B. Yeats, 'He Thinks of Those Who Have Spoken Evil of His Beloved', *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 75.
- ⁷ George Oppen, interview with L. S. Dembo (1968), *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets*, ed. L. S. Dembo and Cyrena Pondrom (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), pp. 172-90 (p. 173).
- ⁸ Donald, Davie, *Ezra Pound: The Poet as Sculptor* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965).
- ⁹ George Oppen, 'Three Poets' (1962), *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 23-8 (pp. 25-6).
- ¹⁰ Qtd. in Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 147.
- ¹¹ Marjorie G. Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors": "Projective Verse" Revisited', *ELH* 40.2 (1973), pp. 285-306 (p. 295).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.
- ¹⁵ For Olson, we might say, as for Merleau-Ponty, human beings are embodied objects; objects that experience their own agency.
- ¹⁶ Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification', p. 194.

¹⁷ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 245.

¹⁸ Ezra Pound, Letter to Hubert Creekmore (1939), qtd. in Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors"', p. 293

¹⁹ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 241.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 247.

²¹ Ibid., p. 248.

²² Ibid., p. 249.

²³ Ibid., p. 242.

²⁴ Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors"', p. 292.

²⁵ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 244. The scrupulous Robert von Hallberg responded to Perloff's criticism by arguing that she had missed the point and insisting on the importance, to Olson, of influence and tradition. 'Olson locates his work in a tradition coming out of Pound and Williams; he makes every effort to state his derivation explicitly. No one would discount Shakespeare's or Sidney's sonnet sequences by showing that they derive from Petrarch'. Robert von Hallberg, *The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 40. Von Halberg is right about tradition, but Perloff was surely right to inquire how far 'Projective Verse' extended the tradition.

²⁶ Ezra Pound, Canto LXXXI, *The Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), pp. 531-6 (p. 532).

²⁷ Robert Creeley, 'A Sense of Measure' (1964), *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 486-8 (p. 487).

²⁸ See for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

²⁹ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 243.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 247.

³¹ 'Therefore I find it difficult to call myself a poet or a writer. If there are no walls there are no names.' Olson, 'The Present Is Prologue' (1952), *CP*, pp. 205-7 (p. 206).

³² In an impressive recent study of Olson that uses the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to shed light on Olson's relationship to the thought of both A. N. Whitehead and Carl Jung, Miriam Nichols writes that 'the human subject is chiasmatically entangled in and open to a dynamic "outside" that it cannot gather up as an object of knowledge.' Miriam Nichols, 'Charles Olson:

Architect of Place', *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), pp. 19-64 (p. 29).

³³ Charles Olson, 'Human Universe' (1951), *CP*, pp. 155-66 (pp. 157-8).

³⁴ Olson, 'Projective Verse', 247.

³⁵ Olson, 'Human Universe', p. 162.

³⁶ Olson, 'Projective Verse', pp. 243-4.

³⁷ 'Meaning, [Olson] feels, is unmediated and depends neither on concepts of representation nor on the dichotomy between descriptive facts and interpretive values.' Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), pp. 94-5.

³⁸ Olson, 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein' (1959), *CP*, pp. 250-2 (p. 251).

³⁹ Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification', p. 194.

⁴⁰ Thus Olson praises Hart Crane for his 'push along that one arc of freshness, the attempt to get back to the word as handle.' Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 244.

⁴¹ 'Thinking itself is man's simplest, and for that reason hardest, handiwork.' Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 16-7.

⁴² Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 240.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 243. Stephen Fredman argues that the 'process of recognition is the central quality of projectivist poetics' in his book *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); see especially ch. 4, 'The Poetics of Recognition', pp. 73-93 (p. 77).

⁴⁴ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 240.

⁴⁵ Robert Creeley, 'A Sense of Measure', p. 487.

⁴⁶ Or as Kant said, 'intuitions without concepts'—intuitions that are not apprehended by concepts—'are blind.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 193-4 (B 75). We apprehend the world and the shape of the world, its 'coherence', as Creeley says, at one and the same time. Pound said 'I cannot make it cohere': to which Olson and Creeley might be taken to reply, relax, my friend, you don't need to. Ezra Pound, Canto CXVI, *The Cantos*, p. 810.

⁴⁷ Fredman, *Grounding of American Poetry*, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Olson, 'Projective Verse', pp. 243-4.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 242.

⁵⁰ Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Charles Olson: Process and relationship' (1977), *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 58-80.

⁵¹ Olson, 'Maximus, to himself', *The Maximus Poems [MP]*, ed. George F. Butterick (University of California Press, 1983), pp. 56-7 (p. 57).

⁵² Olson, 'The Escaped Cock: Notes on Lawrence and the Real', *CP*, pp. 138-40 (p. 138).

⁵³ Olson, 'The Gate and the Center', *CP*, pp. 168-73 (p. 169).

⁵⁴ Waldrop, 'Olson', pp. 60, 63.

⁵⁵ Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 247.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 248.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 239.

⁵⁸ Creeley, 'A Sense of Measure', 488.

⁵⁹ Creeley, 'The Rhythm', *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1945-1975* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 265-6 (p. 265).

⁶⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Introduction, 'Nature', *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 5-49 (pp. 7-8).

⁶¹ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (1992; New York, New Directions, 1995), pp. 5, 199.

⁶² Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 242.

⁶³ Lorine Niedecker, 'In the great snowfall before the bomb', *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 142-3 (p. 143).

⁶⁴ 'Olson, I think, is the central figure of postmodern poetics' (Altieri, p. 102). For Olson's use of the term postmodern see George F. Butterick, 'Charles Olson and the Postmodern Advance', *The Iowa Review*, 11.4 (1980), pp. 3-27. Butterick sees the postmodern in Olson as the spontaneous encounter with the livingness of myth, the revelation of the presence of mythology within and all around us: mythology, thus apprehended, does not ironize or belittle our experience but rather forms and informs it: we come home, into our own. Whatever the limitations of Perry Anderson's account of Olson in his

historical survey of the postmodern, he rightly acknowledges that 'It was here, then, that the elements for an affirmative conception of the postmodern were first assembled.' Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 12. Enlarging on this point, Ralph Maud has written that while 'Postmodern is now generally understood to be modernism pushed to an extreme of alienation . . . For Olson, the postmodern was a reversal of the modern, not an intensification'; it was the experience and confidence of an archaic *belonging* rather than one of aggravated alienation—or, in psychological terms, it was Jung rather than Freud. Ralph Maud, 'Charles Olson's Archaic Postmodern', Minutes of the Charles Olson Society 42 (September 2001). <http://charlesolson.org/Files/archaic1.htm> Indeed what Miriam Nichols writes of myth is no less true of Olson's postmodern: 'What Olson sees in myth, I think, is a planet that is still alive enough to be felt as a presence and hence there to be related to. Certainly myth humanizes nature—the mind cannot escape its own forms—but in that human shape, nature is allowed the dignity of independent agency and humanity the chance for complex relationship with it' (Nichols, p. 58).

⁶⁵ 'There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.' Emerson, 'Nature', p. 9.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, p.4

⁶⁷ Olson, 'Letter 5', *MP*, pp. 21-29 (p. 28).

⁶⁸ Olson, 'Human Universe', pp. 157-8.

⁶⁹ It might help matters if we substituted for the principle of analogy the principle of homology—whereby we would read Olson to be saying that to live one's life properly in print is another manifestation of, shares a common ancestry with, living one's life properly in Gloucester—for both are, properly, species of life. The problem with homology is where it seems to reduce two seemingly different things to one underlying thing and so swaps particularity for identity-thinking. For Olson the oneness of identity is not the main concern. Like Nietzsche, Olson is interested in life—in all its manifestations. Identity-thinking forgets the variety of life, whereas Olson insists on it. Homology may, at its crudest or dullest, be a form of identity-thinking, but the *liveliness of life*, which is what Olson is getting at ('to get what you are after—so far as a human being goes, his life'), is not ('Human Universe', p. 162).

⁷⁰ 'Letter 5', p. 29. Nichols writes: 'The question of representation that Olson recognized as problematic in Pound and that became an initiating impetus for his own project as well as those of his peers is exemplified in his confrontation with Ferrini. The two poets continue to occupy the same physical space, but they do so in ways that exclude each other to the point where Olson can say that Ferrini has "left Gloucester."' (p. 21). As she says, 'the problem becomes one of method: how to create value terms; how to argue measure without a rigid yardstick; how to create common places where a couple of poets might meet.' (ibid.). We might draw out the implications of this last point by extending it a little: 'how to create common places where a couple of poets

might meet' *without at the same time meeting everybody else*—or how to preserve the particular without privileging it. As Nichols says, 'Olson's response to this problematic of the early postmodern'—this problematic of the common—'has been discussed now for four decades.' (ibid.)

⁷¹ Olson, 'Letter 6', *MP*, pp. 30-33 (pp. 30, 32).

⁷² Olson, 'Letter 5', p. 28.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ 'Letter 6', p. 32.

⁷⁵ 'Letter 5', p. 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 26

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁸² Fredman, *Grounding of American Poetry*, pp. 34-9.

⁸³ 'Letter 5', p. 27.

⁸⁴ Olson, 'Letter 1', *MP*, pp. 5-8 (p. 8).

⁸⁵ Olson, 'Maximus, to Gloucester, Letter 11', *MP*, pp. 52-5 (p. 52).

⁸⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood* (1920; London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 47-59 (p. 50).

⁸⁷ 'Letter 5', p. 24.

⁸⁸ Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (1960; New York: New Directions, 1973).

⁸⁹ Olson, 'The Post Office', *CP*, pp. 217-35 (pp. 230-1).

⁹⁰ Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *MP*, pp. 184-5 (p. 185).

⁹¹ Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 47, l. 400.

⁹² Olson, 'Letter 27 [withheld]', pp. 184-5.

⁹³ Williams, *Paterson*, p. 42.

⁹⁴ Olson, 'Letter 27 [withheld]', pp. 184-5.

⁹⁵ Olson, 'Human Universe', p. 165.

⁹⁶ I don't mean to suggest by this that poets such as Oppen were not interested in the limitations of the object. Clearly Oppen was—and in limits of all kinds. But his aesthetic of wonder or astonishment was still profoundly focused on the object, with all its limitations, rather than on what we might call projection—the space-time between objects that also brings the body into play. One can find a broad analogy in the differences between the philosophers Kant and Hegel, who stood, not coincidentally, on opposite sides of a similar fence. Kant was concerned to find meaning in our limitations ('a limited, limiting clarity', as Oppen puts it); Hegel by comparison sought to show how our limitations were not what they seemed, how they opened up into possibilities: limitations, if properly apprehended, respected and inhabited, undid themselves—they were launch pads really, from which truth rolled forward.

⁹⁷ Creeley, 'I Know a Man', *Collected Poems*, p. 132.

⁹⁸ Olson, 'December, 1960', *MP*, pp. 194-200 (p. 194).

⁹⁹ 'Maximus, from Dogtown – I', *MP*, pp. 172-6 (p. 172).

¹⁰⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Old Man Travelling; Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch', William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1800), ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 106-7.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁰² For Olson's influence on O'Hara, and the latter's familiarity with 'Projective Verse', see Brad Good, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) and Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁰³ Olson, 'Human Universe', p. 161.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁰⁵ The battlefield is also of course the proper field of epic verse itself—and all the more effectively, we might add, for its not being said; or, more exactly, for its not needing to be said.